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SUBJECT: THE DECLINE OF ESTONIA'S ETHNIC RUSSIAN
POLITICAL PARTIES

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Although ethnic Russians make up about one-third of Estonia's population, they have failed to achieve any significant influence over Estonian politics. Support for Russian parties continues to decline, with most Russians supporting the mainstream Center Party. The small Russian parties which do still exist in Estonia are fractured and focus too narrowly on ethnic issues rather than addressing concerns with broader appeal like the economy and social welfare. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) Ethnic Russian political parties first developed in Estonia during the late 1980's, primarily in opposition to the Estonian independence movement. During the mid to late 1990s, several new Russian political parties emerged with platforms more focused on issues related to ethnicity. Russian parties were first represented in the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament) in 1995. During the 1999 parliamentary elections two ethnically based parties, the United People's Party and the Russian Unity Party, ran on a joint ticket and received a combined 6.8 percent of the vote, earning them six seats in the 101-seat Estonian parliament.

¶3. (U) Despite these early successes, Russian political parties have failed to achieve any significant influence in Estonian politics. Currently, only two Russian political parties are politically engaged, the Constitution Party and the Russian Party. Both parties claim approximately 1,500 registered members, of whom only about 500 are active. (Note: For comparison, the smallest party currently represented in Parliament, the Green Party, has approximately 1500 members. End Note.) During the most recent parliamentary elections, held in March 2007, the Constitution Party received 1.7 percent and the Russian Party 0.2 percent of the vote. As such, neither party achieved the 5 percent threshold necessary to gain a seat in Estonian Parliament.

¶4. (U) A few members of the ethnic Russian political community suggest the downward trend in support for ethnic political parties demonstrates that the Russian speakers in Estonia have become marginalized and apolitical. However, the unrest surrounding the relocation of a Russian World War II memorial in Tallinn in April 2007 (Reftel A) and the continuing debate concerning the Government of Estonia's (GOE) integration reforms (Reftel B) show that Russian speakers in Estonia do have a specific political and social agenda, i.e., countering what they perceive as biased or discriminatory practices against Estonia's ethnic Russian minority. In addition, ethnic Russian support for one of Estonia's largest mainstream political parties has increased significantly over time. During the 2007 Parliamentary elections, the Center Party received an overwhelming 55 percent of the vote in the predominately Russian-speaking county of Ida-Viru, up from 41 percent in

2003 and 56 percent of the vote in Lasnamae, a heavily ethnic Russian borough in Tallinn (up from 41 percent in 2003).

15. (SBU) Some of Estonia's ethnic Russian political leaders blame 'discriminatory practices' by the Estonian government for the decline of their parties. Sergei Jurgens, leader of the Constitution Party, suggested that it has been the GOE's policy to negatively depict Russian political candidates in the press for fear they may attempt to restore the Soviet Union. Rafik Grigorjan, chairman of the Estonian Chamber of National Minorities, an organization established by Russian speaking community leaders in response to the April 2007 riots, claims that many ethnic Russians are afraid to vote for non-Estonian parties because 'anyone can become jobless at any time.' Stanislav Tserepanov, head of the Russia Party, suggested that ethnic support for the Center Party is linked to the relationship between Center Party leader Edgar Saavisar and high ranking officials within the Russian Government. Tserepanov alleges that during the last election, the Russian FSB provided 'technical and financial assistance' to the Center Party in the heavily Russian northeast region of the country. (Note: In 2004, Center Party leaders entered into a 'contract of cooperation' agreement with former Russian President Putin's United Russia Party. End Note.) Even Russian speakers who belong to the more mainstream political parties see a government conspiracy behind the weakened state of Russia's political parties. Sergei Ivanov, an ethnic Russian member of the coalition leading Reform Party, alleges that during the early 1990's, the Estonian security police, KAPO, purposefully 'destroyed' the Russian political elite for fear that Russia would use them as a means of influence.

16. (U) Other members of the ethnic Russian community offer somewhat more pragmatic assessments as to why support for ethnic Russian political parties has steadily declined in the past 10 years. On the one hand, there is the feeling that ethnic Russian parties have suffered from their late entry into independent Estonian politics. According to Estonian law, only citizens have the right to join a political party. As such, a substantial amount of time elapsed before there was a large enough naturalized Russian-speaking constituency to build upon. Even today, there are still close to 115,000 ethnic Russians in Estonia who have not chosen to naturalize and as such cannot belong to a political party. (Note: There are also almost 100,000 long-term residents living in Estonia who are citizens of the Russian Federation and not eligible to vote.) Others have argued that this decline reflects that Russian speakers in Estonia do not vote on the basis of ethnicity, but are instead concerned about their economic future. According to these sources, Russian political leaders consistently ignore economic and other quality of life issues and instead tend to focus solely on ethnic issues like the Estonian language transition program and citizenship.

17. (U) Russian political leaders credit much of the success of the mainstream Center Party to its financial well-being and strategic courting of ethnic Russians. Sergi Jurgens attributes ethnic Russian support for Center to the party's publication of a free Russian language newspaper, widespread television advertising before the last election, and operation of the highest circulating Russian language daily tabloid in Estonia. Stanislav Tserepanov commented that his Russia party is unable to recruit new voters because it failed to meet the 5 percent threshold in the past two elections, rendering Russia ineligible for state financing. As a result, the Russia party has no money to campaign and potential voters are 'unaware' of their existence. In comparison, Center, which currently holds 29 seats received from the state the equivalent of USD 685,600 during the 2007 elections.

8.(U) While Center Party leadership claims not to promote an ethnic agenda, their success in attracting ethnic voters

clearly stems from their support of policies which appeal to Russian voters. Center Party strongly opposed the GOE decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier memorial in April 2007 and Chairman Edgar Saavisar criticized the GOE for its handling of the riots. Following the riots, polls showed a significant increase in ethnic Russian support for Center. The party has also actively supported liberalization of legislation to make it easier for older non-Estonians to naturalize and grant automatic citizenship to children born to non-citizens of the country. Additionally, Center Party traditionally supports raising wages and expanding public sector jobs, issues important to ethnic Estonians and Russians alike.

¶9. (U) An April 2008 opinion poll conducted by TNS EMOR, the largest marketing research and consulting company in Estonia, shows the 50 percent of the Russian speakers living in Tallinn favor Center over other mainstream political parties. The next highest percentage of support goes to the Prime Minister's Reform Party with only 3 percent. While other mainstream parties also point to the fact that they have their own ethnic Russian factions, support for these parties is very low within the Russian community. Sergi Jurgens, leader of the Constitution Party, estimates that about 75 percent of the overall ethnic Russian community in Estonia supports Center Party.

¶10. (SBU) The future of Estonia's ethnic political parties remains unclear. Both parties lack energetic young leadership. In addition, young, politically active ethnic Russians are often lured to the more mainstream political parties by the offer of a more promising career path. Also, despite recognizing the need to broaden their respective platforms and increase their appeal to ethnic voters, several attempts by ethnic Russian parties to agree on a common direction or leadership have failed. In fact, a long rumored merger between the two ethnic Russian political parties, the Russia Party and the Constitution Party, was put to rest in June when the Constitution Party instead merged with another small party, the Estonian Left Party, which is represented in the European Parliament.

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